DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 474 645 CG 031 498

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TITLE	E-Counseling: The Willingness To Participate.
PUB DATE	2001-08-00
NOTE	11p.; Paper presented at the International Education Conference (Selangor, Malaysia, August 27-28, 2001).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adjustment (to Environment); Computer Attitudes; *Counseling; Counselor Client Relationship; Foreign Countries; Information Networks; *Information Technology; *Internet; Telecommunications
IDENTIFIERS	Malaysia; *Online Counseling

ABSTRACT

The advent of information and communication technology has opened a new era in the counseling profession. This study shares the views of computer literate respondents about their willingness to participate in e-counseling sessions. The results showed that the respondents are generally reserved about using e-counseling services and still insist that the physical presence of the counselor is important in the counseling process. The findings however do indicate that the e-counseling method is favorable to the needs of young people aged between 25 to 35 years old. Counselors are offered techniques for overcoming the apprehension of e-counseling consumers. (Contains 34 references.) (GCP)

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ED 474 645

E-Counselling: The Willingness to Participate

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August 27-28, 2001

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ABSTRACT

We are now in the Third Wave (Toffler, 1997; in Mohd. Nor Mamat, 2000), which emphasizes upon the usage of information and communication technology (ICT) in every facet of our lives. According to our Prime Minister, Dato Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamed (Mohd. Nor Mamat, 2000), "we do not have a choice, the era of technology is forcing us to change our way of life and work situation. The faster we change, adopt, and adapt - the better it would be for our future". This study shares the views of computer literate respondents about their willingness to participate in the e-counselling sessions. The results showed that the respondents are generally reserved to use the e-counselling services and still insist that the physical presence of the counsellor is important in the counselling process. The findings however do indicate that the e-counselling method is much favourable to the needs of young people aged between 25 to 35 years old especially females. The study also indicated that e-counselling could in fact save time, cost, and distances to travel in seek of counsellors' assistance despite otherwise.

INTRODUCTION

ICT is no longer a new concept. It is somewhat ingrained in the society today and that it has become part and parcel of our everyday lives. In Malaysia, the campaign is 'one computer for every household'. Though there is no survey conducted to ascertain the above campaign, one can say that it is almost a reality. In the United States for instance, Tapscott (1998) (in Mohd. Nor Mamat, 2000) did a survey and found that about 40% of the households in the United States have access to the Internet and this percentage is thought to be increasing. The United States Internet users come around to 150 million, which is actually half of the world's Internet users. He estimated that by the year 2005, there would be 1 billion users link around the globe. One of the interesting findings in Tapscott's study was that, teenagers as Internet users have increased from 50% in 1994 to 74% in 1996, and to 88% in 1997. He also found that e-mail users have increased from 35 million in 1995 to 80 million in 1998. Of these, 36% were mainly children and teenagers. Hence it could be said that teenagers and Internet are one in the ICT culture.

It is not a different scenario in Malaysia. Not only that each household has their own computers; cyber cafes are tremendously available in most towns. Teenagers and even younger children frequented these cyber cafes (Ding, 2000; Shaharom, 2000). The advent of Wireless Access Protocol (WAP) has made the Internet easily accessible at the palms of their hands and e-mail via WAP is as easy as ABC.

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The advent of the above technology has opened a new era in the counselling profession. Can counselling actually be affected by using WAP? It has been long emphasized that counselling should be undertaken in the face-to-face encounter. This entails a physical presence between the counsellor and the client. Every counsellor to be was told that this process is fundamental. Tang (1996) remarked that the eye contacts between counsellor and client eases the process of sharing and at the same time develops confidence on part of the client to entrust the counsellor with the 'stories of his life'. Accordingly, Tang (1996) commented that eye contacts are able to offer a wider perspective for the counsellor to explore the client's concerns. It is through eye contacts that the non-verbal aspects of communication can provide ample information to know thy client and his concerns.

However as discussed earlier, with the advent of ICT and the practicality of brief therapies and solution-focused therapies (the post-modern approach to therapies), it is seen that the electronic means of conducting counselling is a real possibility. Kalb (2001) quoted Russ Newman from the American Psychological Association as saying, "This is an emerging area" with potential pluses and minuses, ... we're watching and we're interested."

Tait (1999) noted that the traditional approach to counselling should be reconsidered. It is seen that humans interact more with machines rather than human beings. If this were the case, the closest counsellor to a person would be just a 'click' away; hence the process of making an appointment to see the counsellor is something in the past. Being in close competition, the electronic means of acquiring counselling seems to be the cutting edge in the profession (Guterman, 1994, 1996a, 1996b). Counsellors all over the world should be radical to accept these changes because the electronic mode of delivering counselling is actually in abundance across the Internet (Kirk, 1996; Sampson, Kolodinsky, & Greeno, 1997). The services are in the form of e-mail counselling and counsellor education, computing in group and family counselling, on-line support groups, and the Internet as a mental health information source (Oravec, 2000).

What is e-counselling? E-counselling can be defined as follows. Generally it relates to having counselling sessions across a distant. The distant can be narrowed by the usage of telephones, television, and telegraph. While for Sanders and Rosenfield (1998) e-counselling refers to the counselling process through the medium of telecommunication technologies, which includes telephone, Internet, and tele-conferencing. And for Tait (1999), e-counselling refers to the interaction of a counsellor and a client at different places within the same time frame. E-counselling is operationally defined as conducting counselling sessions using telecommunication technologies, i.e. telephones and the Internet.

In Malaysia, there a numerous counselling services offered over the telephones. Amongst them are the Befrienders, Pink Triangle, Teledera, Cancer On-Line, AIDS On-line and others. Studies done by Derham and Womersley (1995), Oravec (1996), Bobevski, Holgate, and McLennan (1997), Rosenfield (1997), Sanders and Rosenfiled (1998), and Tait (1999) have all indicated the significance and importance of using telephones as a means of conducting counselling sessions.

In the ICT era, the Internet has taken over the telephone as a means of conducting counselling. What is more interesting is that the mobile telephones is in existence and WAP enables one to be in a session any time, any where they like. Studies done by Murphy and Mitchell (1998); Caudron (1998); Lawrence (1998) (in Murphy & Mitchell, 1998); Bloom

(1998); Oravec (2000); and Lily Mastura (2000) have indicated that the Internet is another choice to conduct counselling and they can be as successful as the face-to-face counselling. On the other hand, an exploratory study conducted by Othman (2000) indicated that school counsellors were unready and unprepared to accept the current electronic influx. If the counsellors are in this state of dilemma, then what happens at the end of line – clients would be in a 'fixated' stage?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims to identify the respondents' willingness to participate in e-counsellling; respondents' awareness about the existence of e-counselling; respondents' willingness to experience counselling in virtual reality; respondents' ability to save time while engaged in e-counselling; respondents' need for the physical presence of the counsellor; respondents' economic sources to fund the e-counselling process; and respondents' views about the future of e-counselling in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

This is an ex-post facto research. Respondents for the study comprised of 94 students from a private college in the state of Selangor. They are aged between 17 to 25 years old (81%) and 26 to 35 years old (19%). There were 62 (67%) males and 32 (33%) females. Of these numbers, 34 (36.6%) were Malays, 47 (50.5%) Chinese, 9 (9.7%) Indians, and 3 (3.2%) others. Amongst the Malay respondents only 23 (68%) have attended traditional counselling sessions while 14 (30%) for the Chinese and only 1 (11%) for the Indian. Of the total respondents, 88 (95.7%) were computer literates while 6 (4.3%) were otherwise. About 18 (19.2%) of the respondents have attempted using e-counselling, while 69 (73.4%) have not tried before. Of these numbers that attempted e-counselling 11 (18%) were males and 7 (22%) were females. The students were mainly from the computer science, information science and computer, and information technology degrees.

Data for the research were collected by questionnaires, which were constructed by the researchers. The questionnaire consists of two parts: Part A: Demographic Information plus Computer Skills and Part B: Students' Perception of E-Counselling: Willingness to Participate. Respondents answered the questionnaire based on a 5 point-Likert scale. The researchers administered the questionnaires personally.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Willingness to participate

The results revealed that 50 (52%) of the respondents were willing to accept or participate in the e-counselling sessions. This is quite a conservative number. There were 39 (41.9%) respondents who were not sure whether they could participate in the process or not while 5 (5.4%) of the respondents totally reject the idea of e-counselling.

Awareness of e-counselling

It was found that respondents were generally not aware of the existence of e- counselling in Malaysia (49.5%). However, a single item tested, indicated that only 19.7% were not sure of

the existence of this service. This might reflect the fact that, respondents are aware of the services but not willing to try it yet. They do however indicated that they would like to try (69%), however are quite unsure how to go about it. Client's anonymity would be a factor that has encouraged the respondents (74.2%) wanting to try the service. This finding is somewhat similar to the findings of Oravec (1996), Bobevski, Holgate, and McLennan (1997), and Tait (1999).

A majority of the respondents (74.1%) felt that this service ought to be offered in Malaysia though they are not quite ready to participate. The unready ness to participate is due to the fact that respondents thought that their concerns could not be dealt with efficiently through the wireless protocol. This is supported by the fact that respondents' felt that the face-to-face encounter with the counsellor is more convincing for the process to be successful.

Counselling in virtual reality

Though e-counselling could actually save the distance to travel, it is actually thought not so to travel the domains of emotion. About 60% of the respondents thought that distance to travel are no longer an issue, but the inexistence of a counsellor would lead to improper understanding and interpretations of their concerns. This finding is similar to the opinions of McLeod (1993). Accordingly, McLeod commented that e-counselling could lead to the high risk of misunderstanding. This will eventually lead to high levels of frustrations and client will feel that no one can help them. E-counselling could also lead to a different interpretation of the counsellor's warmth during the process. It was also noted by McLeod and Machin (1998) that the organizations or individuals offering the e-counselling services are at often times not qualified thus leading to further misnomer in the profession.

Despite the above concerns, respondents however felt that e-counselling is easily accessible (58.7%), flexible (63.4%), well attended to (57%), felt not neglected (60.3%), save the distance to travel (66%), felt no restrictions to express emotions (59.2%), the counsellor's presence is felt (57%), e-counselling is not a deterring factor for the counsellor to understand their clients (66%). The mixed findings suggest that e-counselling is in the transition stage of acceptance amongst its users.

Ability to save time

Most literature reviews suggest that e-counselling could actually save time. This finding is not uncommon for this particular research. Due the availability of the services within the 24 hours duration, respondents felt that they could have a 'friend in need' when the need arises. 74.4% of the respondents felt that they do not waste time to travel to seek for their counsellors and that 73% of the respondents reported that the e-counselling hours are so flexible. E-counselling could actually save time, avoid the hassle of making an appointment, and to wait for the counsellors in the waiting room. As mentioned earlier, when the need arises, get to the computer, and start 'pouring your heart out'. By this criteria, 75.5% of the respondents opted that they would use this service. And because the respondents were students, they felt that they could always have their leisure hours to communicate with their counsellors and not get so uptight during the day to have their sessions.

With regard to saving time, 53.8% of the respondents generally felt like so. There is however 56.2% of the respondents felt that whether it saves time or not is not the real issue. The presence of the counsellor is still important.

Physical presence of the counsellor

About 59.5% of the respondents felt that the physical presence of the counsellor is still important while 40.5% felt it is quite all right for the counsellor to be absent physically. Although it is quite all right for the counsellor to be absent physically and that e-counselling takes place, these respondents felt that their counsellors need not understand them fully via this method. Though a little confused here, the point that could be deduced is that the presence of the counsellors does still make a difference in the process. Accordingly, Murphy and Mitchell (1998) commented that the physical absence of clients (or both) would be an inadequate source to work with. Counselors and clients lack body language to work with in e-counselling. This absence definitely gives alarm to the clients especially (doubting whether the counsellor really understand them or not) and for the counsellors to make appropriate interpretations of the responses provided by the clients. So any misinterpretations incurred during the e-counselling process does actually worry as mentioned by McLeod earlier. Siegman and Friedstein(1989) also mentioned the fact that communications by electronic mode lack the sound of voice. The absence of voice will deter a fluent understanding and interpretations of the message conveyed. Matthews and Marino (1990) thought that non-verbal communication in the face-to-face encounter actually conveys a lot of message rather than verbal communication. And for these, e-counselling has its barriers. The elements of non-verbal communication like eye contact, facial expression, body posture and gesture are all absent accept the messages. The worries on part of the counsellors have been reported by Colon (1996). Counsellors worry about not being able to see the non-verbal aspects of communication of the client and fears making slipshod interpretations of their clients concerns.

Sources to fund the e-counselling process

Though the respondents (about 23 to 26%) generally agree that the e-counselling process could save money, a majority of the respondents felt that money is actually an issue for them to be involved in the e-counselling process. They are quite wary of the terms of payments for the services, they worry about the increments in their telephone bills, and anxious of the high fees incurred for the e-counselling services. These show that when it comes to cost, this could be a deterring factor. The long hours on-line triggers on the bill, which then triggers pressure on the pocket. Therefore, the respondents felt that to save money, is to walk to the counsellor's office – this would contradict the earlier findings. Tait (1999), Rosenfield (1997), and Oravec (2000) have argued about the monetary implication of e-counselling. However, Oravec (2000) felt that to be on-line will save the distance and fare to see the counsellor. Thus, saving money can be very true in this case, but the odds are many. This situation can be explained by the fact that respondents are still studying and income is a great worry. The situation could be different for people with careers and a steady income.

The future of e-counselling in Malaysia

Despite the worries mentioned above, respondents felt that e-counselling still has a future in Malaysia. They are quite positive towards it, though there are still others who are not sure about the service. Watts (1996) took the view that 'there are some kinds of users who are happier

using the computer than other sources of help', and 'some forms of help which the computer is better able to provide'. He observed that those 'with relatively stable goals and a relatively strong sense of independence are more satisfied with computer-aided guidance systems and benefit more from them than do individuals with less stable goals and less sense of independence'. According to Kalb (2001), "we're all more pressed for time, trying to avoid despair, … Internet counseling is immediate, it's focused, and it cuts to the chase".

If e-counselling services were to be offered, they would want a cheaper or lower rate or even suggest a student rate. The respondents also agreed that the services to be extensive so that it reaches the masses, e-counselling could actually compete with the traditional counselling process. Sanders and Rosenfield (1998) and Guterman and Kirk (1999) reported that e-counselling is the second-best method to traditional counselling. In Sanders' study, e-counselling was given free to the students through their high schools and colleges.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus it can be concluded that despite the uncertainties and anxieties, e-counselling still has a promising future. It was further revealed in the study that female students seemed to favour e-counselling than males. This finding is similar to the ones done by Rosenfield and Smillie (1998) and Surtees, Pharoah, and Wainright (1998). Accordingly, females are able to relate their emotions more readily and easily than males. So despite any medium, females are better communicators than male (Dewdney, 1995). It was also found in the study that the younger age group of respondents is more inclined to use this service as compared to the older age group. Most of the respondents in the younger age group are teenagers (a situation similar to Tapscott's finding). And according to Erickson's psychosocial stages of development, teenagers are busy searching for their self-identities. So it does not stop them to look for it in any mode, medium or form.

Hence despite the above, though the responses toward e-counselling were quite conservative generally, in some aspects of the study, it did show the respondents' positivism towards e-counselling. To overcome the apprehension of e-counselling consumers, various techniques have been introduced to include emotional bracketing, emoticon, textual visualizations, literary techniques, and even tele-conferencing to overcome the physical absence of the counsellors. These techniques have been found to be successful (Argyle & Shields, 1996; Murphy & Mitchell, 1998; Tait, 1999; Lily Mastura, 2000). To overcome the burden of cost, a few suggestions are forwarded. For instance, the toll free line, free WAP using the short message sending (SMS) services, and local area network (LAN) are alternatives that can be explored to ensure e-counselling has got its place in peoples' mind. To ensure the place in peoples' mind, the e-counselling services (agency and personnel) need to be recognized. This can be done professionally through courses organized by an accredited organization to handle matters and acts pertaining to conducting counselling electronically. Morrissey (1998) noted that ACES Technology Interest Network have drafted the list 'Technical Competencies for Counselor Education Students' to include basic computer and Internet proficiency. Support from the appropriate agencies like the Ministry of Education (if e-counselling is to take place in education), PERKAMA (Malaysian Counselling Association) – to guide the practice of e-counselling, the Ministry of Communication and Multimedia- to provide free telecommunication technologies for this purpose, the Ministry of Finance- to provide funds for the cost of operating

e-counselling, and any private sectors that have an interest in the world of telecommunication technologies.

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